

**Testimony
by
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**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Farm Bill Listening Session**

Fresno, California

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Introductions

Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. My name is Robert Guenther and I currently serve as Vice President of Public Policy for United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association (United). I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify this afternoon on behalf of our members in the U.S. fruit and vegetable industry regarding the future direction of farm policy.

As the national trade organization representing the produce industry, our members include growers, shippers and marketers in almost every state in the nation, as well as a broad cross section of state, regional and commodity groups representing produce growers across the country. In fact, you will hear (have heard) from many of them today.

Over the years, the produce industry has gone through tremendous changes in an effort to remain profitable, satisfy consumer demands, adapt to new technology, and compete in an increasingly global market place. Today, growers are facing the most strident economic conditions and regulatory challenges they've seen in decades. Meanwhile, the consumption of commodity after commodity seems to be stagnating. While the perishable nature of our products present unique challenges and highly volatile markets, our industry has not relied on traditional farm programs to sustain our business. We're proud of our commitment to free markets, and don't want that to change.

But as the Administration and Congress begin to consider farm policy for the 2007 Farm Bill, we ask respectfully that one important thing does change: Today, the fruit and vegetable industry

represents almost one-quarter of the nation's total crop value, and is a strong contributor to our export opportunities. We believe our sector of agriculture must receive significantly greater attention in future farm policy, and that the next Farm Bill addresses the numerous issues we face.

Farm Bill Working Group

In May, produce industry leaders met in Washington to discuss developing policy positions for the 2007 Farm Bill debate. These leaders agreed that it will be extremely important that the issues affecting the produce industry be considered and the industry play a major role in the development of the nation's farm policy and the 2007 Farm Bill. As a result, the *Farm Bill Working Group* was created with 17 produce organizations from every fruit and vegetable producing region in the United States participating in this effort.

Currently, the Farm Bill Working Group is meeting to develop comprehensive recommendations for the next Farm Bill and over the next several months will *finalize their recommendations*. These initiatives will focus on providing policy solutions to the economic concerns expressed over the last several years by our industry. In addition, we will look to build upon our past successful policy efforts that were achieved through the 2002 Farm Bill, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, and the passage of the Specialty Crop Competitiveness Act of 2004. All of these efforts which are now law, have help shaped federal agriculture policies to strengthen the competitiveness of our industry and grow consumption of fruits and vegetables. To be clear, the Farm Bill working group will complete its work this Fall and present what we believe will be the most comprehensive effort to date by the produce industry to develop federal farm policy which elevates the federal government's financial investment into program priorities for the produce industry.

Produce Industry Farm Policy Recommendations

Overall, United's members strongly support the development of farm policies that will sustain financial stability and viability of our nation's agriculture industry while maintaining appropriate flexibility for our producers. *Ultimately, we believe the goal of any farm policy developed by*

Congress, the Administration, and commodity groups should not advocate recommendations which distort the marketplace, but rather promote opportunity and flexibility in federal farm programs that will drive utilization of the tremendous resources we offer the world. Out of this have emerged several key policy areas that should be considered in the next Farm Bill. Those include:

- Maintaining the current planting flexibility law
- Securing permanent funding for state block grants
- Obtaining better access for fruit and vegetable producers to conservation programs including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program ^(EQIP) ~~(EQIP)~~ and the Conservation Security Program(CSP)
- Expanding the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program to all 50 states
- Increased funding and policy implementation for the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC)

Conclusion

Again, on behalf of United's members, we look forward to working with you and your department to take on these important issues and the many other challenges facing the fruit and vegetable industry. Fruit and vegetable growers produce crops that are vital to the health of Americans and represent a significant segment of American agriculture. We urge you to take these issues, and the many other challenges facing the fruit and vegetable industry, fully into consideration as you move forward in your Farm Bill listening sessions and as you consider the 2007 Farm Bill.

Thank you

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